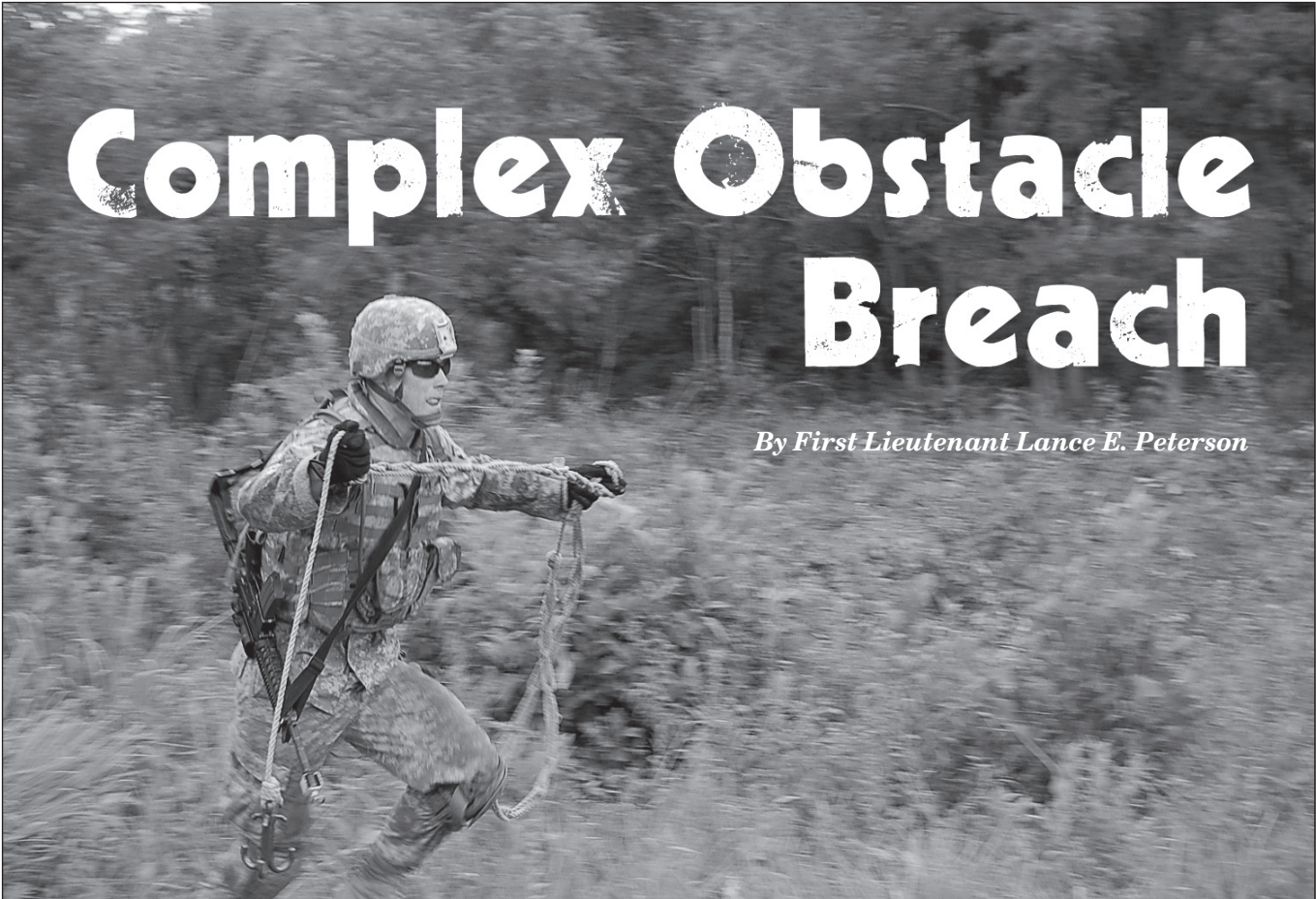


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Complex Obstacle Breach

By First Lieutenant Lance E. Peterson



After 11 days in sweltering heat, the Soldiers of Alpha Company, Special Troops Battalion, 4th Infantry Brigade Combat Team, 1st Infantry Division, reached the final training event in a brigade field training exercise at Fort Riley, Kansas. They awaited their chance to showcase their talents in conducting a dismounted complex obstacle breach on a wire-mine-wire obstacle.

A platoon level complex obstacle breach requires a coordinated effort with multiple actions on the objective occurring simultaneously, which is an exceptionally difficult and important part of the combat engineer mission-essential task list in an infantry brigade combat team. Unfortunately, combat engineers of today do not always get to practice this important skill because of the myriad of other tasks they must accomplish in the short dwell time they have between deployments. The primary reason that typical engineer companies lack this type of training is that, in our current conflicts, route clearance has become the focus for combat engineers. The types of countermine operations now being performed do not require the same proficiency in complex or combined arms breaches—let alone the emplacement of antitank mines—as the Engineer Regiment had 15 years ago. However, the complex obstacle breach is still a vital task that needs to be continuously trained to combat engineers, young and old. Though not directly applicable to current operations, conditions could change at any time. It is imperative to

prevent the atrophy of skills that allow Army engineers to perform their core functions of providing mobility, counter-mobility, and survivability support to maneuver units.

Extra dwell time allowed Alpha Company to shift its focus onto tasks that are trained far less frequently—yet are no less important—than those that have been the typical focus of engineer-specific training. The ability to integrate more recent additions to the engineer mission-essential task list with long-standing core engineer tasks will help prepare the company to perform full spectrum operations.

The Soldiers of Alpha Company entered the “train/ready” force pool of the Army force generation cycle in February 2011 with an opportunity to train on individual combat engineer tasks; it was a chance to get back to the basics of being full spectrum combat engineers. Quarter by quarter, the company increased the level of training from individual and fire team levels to squad and section levels. They finished unified land operations training at the platoon level by the fourth quarter of fiscal year 2011. During this time, sergeants and staff sergeants were arming M15 and M21 antitank mines for the first time in years and arming a modular pack mine system for perhaps the first time in their careers. Equipment operators were digging individual and crew-served weapon fighting positions for the first time in years—or in their careers—as well.



Combat engineer Soldiers assault through the obstacle enroute to destroy the enemy on the objective.

During Alpha Company's final training exercise, each platoon was required to create a lane through a wire-mine-wire obstacle using manual techniques in the time limits established in Army doctrine. Failing to complete the breach to standard labeled the platoon as deficient, earning them a spot back at the line of departure. Some of the company platoon sergeants had trained on this task before, but this was the first experience of conducting a platoon breach for many junior Soldiers. This meant that platoons had an extended execution phase spread over 3 days. The first day of the exercise was allocated for platoon leaders to receive the operations order and begin troop leading procedures and rehearsals at lower levels. The execution phase consisted of a full day of dry runs, a full day of blank runs coupled with demolition explosive simulators, and the final day when each platoon conducted a live breach.

Alpha Company took some risk in its training plan in the fourth quarter by focusing solely on mobility tasks because there was not room on the training schedule for platoon level, high-intensity, conflict-based countermobility tasks. The need to begin training on assumed deployment task requirements and equipment outweighed the need to become "trained" on all mission-essential tasks. The transition of the Engineer Regiment from a deployment-centered organization to a full spectrum operations-centered organization will not happen overnight. The transition won't be complete until a deployable engineer unit can complete the full 2-year Army force generation cycle without the disruption of a deployment. Alpha Company was fortunate to have enough time to train on full spectrum operations tasks and to

exercise a different style of training management at the company level and below. The company had only small amounts of required training, which left plenty of room on the schedule for tasks that the company leadership felt needed training. For the first time in years, junior leaders had input to help shape the direction of training and the training management system.

The Army has made a lot of changes to its professional schooling to create adaptive leaders who do not just survive, but thrive in an asymmetric battlefield environment. The future will see a decrease in deployments, so we could see a decrease in the number of adaptive leaders because of the routine and structured nature of training that focuses on the mission-essential task list. The key to maintaining adaptive leaders in a peacetime Army will depend on commanders who provide multifaceted training events that present leaders with unfamiliar situations. This type of training will force them to think critically, to be creative, and to exercise moral and ethical decisionmaking skills. These skills are—and will remain—the most important traits required for junior leaders to be ready for the next conflict as the Army transitions out of its decade of war.



First Lieutenant Peterson graduated from the U.S. Military Academy in 2009. He is also a graduate of the Airborne, Air Assault, and Counter Explosive Hazard Planners Courses. He was a platoon leader during the exercise described in this article and now serves as the executive officer for brigade Headquarters and Headquarters Company, 4th Infantry Brigade Combat Team, 1st Infantry Division.